



# 48 HOURS IN ATHENS

A historical city once home to the greatest civilisation known to mankind, Athens surprises visitors with its edgy vibe, rich culture, and delectable Mediterranean fare.

Text **Natasha Amar**

The ancient capital of Athens has a long and illustrious history; it has been continuously inhabited for no less than seven millennia, and credited with birthing democracy as we know it. But that isn't the only contribution the Ancient Greeks made to mankind; among other inventions, they gave us theatre, philosophy, cartography, the alphabet, and the Olympics. It's no surprise then that nothing quite prepares you for the rush of unmitigated awe and humility as you walk through the oldest neighbourhoods of Athens, in the footsteps of the world's greatest civilisation, surrounded by crumbling reminders of its glory.

An interesting juxtaposition to this historical character is the city's edgy grit; a desire to be seen as a modern metropolis defined by its vibrant culture, creative communities, and entrepreneurial spirit rather than its economic crisis. On summer afternoons, young Greeks discuss politics, economics, and tech start-ups over chilled Espresso Freddos (another Greek invention) in cafes that spill onto cobbled backstreets. Here and in the city's bustling markets, crowded squares, eclectic neighbourhoods, and around ancient temples is a taste of modern Athenian life, always lively but never rushed.



This page: The Parthenon, the magnificent temple on the Acropolis of Athens.



Courtesy of Strofi



Courtesy of Varoulko Seaside



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9.00 A.M.

**DELVE INTO HISTORY AT THE ACROPOLIS OF ATHENS**

Beat the crowds with an early visit to the mighty Acropolis of Athens, described by UNESCO as the symbol of world heritage that looks upon the city from its high location on the Acropolis rock.

The complex was built 2,500 years ago as a symbol of the socio-economic, cultural, and political prowess of Athens. The most important and impressive monument here is the Parthenon, originally dedicated to the Goddess Athena Parthenos, and you soon realise, its the inspiration behind prestigious buildings around the world including the White House.

As you walk around the complex looking at what's left and restored of the other monuments, the Propylaea entrance, Erechtheum and Porch of the Caryatids, Temple of Athena Nike, and Theater of Dionysus, you can't help but be struck by the realisation that the citadel has seen it all; glory, gladiatorial combats, wartime plundering, earthquakes, vandalism, and several conversions, with the current structures being used as a Roman cathedral, Frankish palace, Turkish harem, Ottoman mosque, and everything in between, to have survived into our times – a feat that seems nothing short of miraculous.

At the base of the Acropolis, the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, an amphitheatre (7) from the Roman times is an excellent photo-stop and a worthy venue to attend concerts, opera, and theatre performances during the annual arts festival, Athens & Epidaurus Festival.

While relics from the Acropolis of Athens lie in far-flung museums such as the Louvre and the British Museum, it is in the vicinity that the Acropolis Museum houses multimedia exhibits and archaeological treasures; statues, figurines, pottery, tableware, toys, and everyday objects, all offering a fascinating insight into the original features of the complex and ancient Athenian life.

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1.30 P.M.

**GREEK CUISINE AT STROFI**

Something of an institution, Strofi (2) opened its doors in 1975 and is the perfect place to get acquainted with Greek cuisine. Order a selection of *mezethes* (appetisers) such as smoked eggplant salad, grilled halloumi, zucchini balls, spinach pie, and ouzo-flavoured shrimp saganaki. For mains, choose from one of many meat and fish dishes, grilled, stewed, or cooked in a clay pot.

3.00 P.M.

**FEAST ON THE VIEW AT FILOPAPPOU HILL**

Post lunch, hike to Filopappou Hill, southwest of the Acropolis, to enjoy fantastic panoramic views over Athens and the Aegean Sea. On your way up, make a quick stop at the 16th-century Church of Agios Dimitrios Loumbardiaris and Socrates Prison. The Monument of Philopappos (3) graces the summit. The hill is a great spot to get that postcard shot of the Acropolis.

5.00 P.M.

**GET LOST IN THE ENCLAVE OF ANAFIOTIKA**

In the quiet enclave of Anafiotika (4), at the base of the Acropolis, cats follow you around narrow alleyways that are dressed with fuchsia bougainvillea flowers as you pass by whitewashed stone houses with bright blue doors. The village-like neighbourhood was built by stonemasons who arrived in the 1800s from the island of Anafi in the architectural style they knew best and one that stands out today from the rest of Athens.

7.00 P.M.

**SHOPPING AT ERMOU STREET**

At Ermou Street, high-street retailers like Zara and Bershka rub shoulders with local designer boutiques and little shops and smartly-dressed locals and tourists walk with a sense of purpose, browsing window displays of apparel, shoes, and bags. Whatever your style, you're sure to be tempted to shop here and in the streets around Ermou.

09.30 P.M.

**TUCK INTO SEAFOOD AT VAROULKO SEASIDE**

Head to Piraeus to dine at the city's award-winning seafood restaurant Varoulko Seaside (5) with a gorgeous view of the port. This is the first restaurant in Athens to have been awarded a Michelin Star, and its well-travelled Chef Lefteris Lazarou has cooked for international dignitaries and even appeared as a judge on cooking reality show, MasterChef. Expect an innovative take on classic Mediterranean flavours and tuck into grilled cuttlefish, squid with pesto, mango and shrimp risotto, and squid couscous with Amaretto.

10.00 A.M.

**WANDER THROUGH THE CENTRAL MARKET**

Colourful, crowded, and often cacophonous, the Varvakeios Agora (6) is the central market in Athens where Greek chefs keenly study rows of silvery eel, pink salmon, and fresh clams to ascertain whether or not they're fit to grace their dinner tables, and butchers in aprons call out to you to look at cuts of lamb and other meat. There's a large fruit and vegetable section across the street that makes for more pleasant market wandering. You'll find stores selling cheese, nuts, driedfruits, spices, tea, and olive varieties, which you're welcome to sample.

12.00 P.M.

**FLEA MARKET FINDS IN MONASTIRAKI**

Time flies when you're browsing through the quirky, unique, and eclectic merchandise at the Monastiraki Flea Market (7). From vinyl records, antique jewellery, football jerseys, and old coins to fake Bob Marley braids, gramophones, and vintage clocks, you'll find it all here. Bring your best haggling game.



Jose Peral / age fotostock / Dinodia

**1.00 P.M.**

### TAVERNA LUNCH AT MAIANDROS

Rest your legs at Maiandros, a café with friendly service and a pleasant outdoor section to watch the world go by. Their grilled souvlaki meats with a side of tzatziki are the perfect summertime meal.

**2.30 P.M.**

### TOUR THE CITY'S OLDEST NEIGHBOURHOOD

Burn off calories with a walking tour of the oldest neighbourhood Plaka, to see monuments around the Ancient Agora, central marketplace for the ancient Greeks, and the Roman Agora where an inscription on the Gate of Athena Archegetis states that it was built by Julius Caesar and Augustus in the 1st century BC. Then, take the car-free cobbled streets to walk by shops selling everything from gold jewellery to footwear (8), and dotted with open-air cafés to your next stop.

**4.00 P.M.**

### SYNTAGMA SQUARE AND NATIONAL GARDEN

Syntagma Square – in the centre of which is the Hellenic Parliament – is where modern day public protests, rallies, and political demonstrations take place. Just like the Ancient Agora, this square, with its fountain and statues, is the epicentre for modern Athenian social and political life. You can witness the hourly Changing of the Guard ceremony (9) in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and do keep your camera ready. To the right of the Parliament building, the National Garden is a leafy and tranquil oasis with ponds, shaded benches, and more, perfect to while away an hour or two.

**7.00 P.M.**

### SPECTACULAR SUNSET AT LYCABETTUS HILL

Take the funicular through a cliff tunnel to Lycabettus Hill (10) to enjoy breathtaking views of



10

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8

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Athens and the Aegean Sea from 277m above sea level. Time your visit so that you're at the summit to watch the sky turn rose gold around sunset and see the Acropolis light up like an ethereal crown over the city. There's an 18th-century chapel at the top, Agios Georgios.

**9.00 P.M.**

### PELOPONNESIAN CUISINE AT MANI MANI

The classic décor, impeccable service and hearty fare from the Mani region in Peloponnese are all great reasons to visit Mani Mani that serves up regional specialties in a contemporary setting. Begin with *taramosalata* (cod fish puree), *kagianas* (omelette with sausage and cheese), and refreshing Mani Mani salad. Choose from mains like *hilopites* (Greek egg pasta), and stuffed rooster, among other dishes. ■



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#### Fact File

#### Accommodation

Athens offers a wide range of accommodation ranging from hip hostels and trendy boutique hotels to luxury resorts.

#### For more information

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